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UNCLAS E F T O SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000158

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SENSITIVE NOFORN

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TAGS: [EAID](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [BM](#) [UNICEF](#) [NGO](#)

SUBJECT: FIELD OBSERVATIONS OF UNICEF BURMA

Classified By: COM CARMEN M. MARTINEZ FOR REASON 1.5(D).

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Thirty-five percent of Burma's children are malnourished, while one out of ten dies by age five, according to UNICEF. Emboff traveled with a UNICEF team to Karen and Mon States recently to observe UNICEF's field operations. Embassy Rangoon is highly supportive of UNICEF's activities in Burma and hopes U.S. funding for these programs remains strong. End Summary.

2. (SBU) ON THE ROAD WITH UNICEF:

UNICEF works in 62 of Burma's 324 townships (counties) running projects targeting rural health, basic education, and water resources to help the country's vulnerable children. Emboff joined seven other diplomats, UNICEF's new Country Director, and local authorities in a visit to project sites in Mon State January 19 - 21. Mon State, in southeastern Burma, is home to the Mon ethnic minority, which speaks a language in the Khmer family. Mon State is relatively peaceful today, apart from some residual banditry/insurgency in its southern district. We traversed parts of Karen State and noted that farms, villages, and towns there were visibly poorer and run down, probably a result of a half-century of civil strife.

3. (U) USE THE LATRINE, WASH YOUR HANDS

One of UNICEF's major activities is helping community schools teach and practice "The Four Cleans." We visited several schools that had UNICEF-assisted potable water projects, sanitary latrines, and programs to teach students healthful habits regarding toilets, drinking water, clean hands, and safe food. With diarrhea the second-leading killer of children after malaria, instilling even these health fundamentals can save lives.

4. (U) DIPLOMATS AGAINST BRAIN DAMAGE

UNICEF has a very successful program to iodize Burma's salt supply. The group visited a salt evaporation company and inspected the iodine-adding process. Thanks to UNICEF's efforts, the majority of Burma's salt is iodized and the rate of goiter and related problems, including potential brain damage, is much reduced. The company had white baseball caps printed for our visit with the admonition "Prevent Brain Damage" emblazoned across the front. NOTE: This gaggle of diplomats probably caused some confusion and amusement among locals as we later visited many villages, all wearing our caps bearing this slogan.

5. (U) "I visited a prostitute and now have AIDS"

UNICEF provides teachers in rural schools with training in special life skills dealing with sensitive issues like reproductive health and HIV/AIDS. We witnessed a role-playing class in a middle school in which students were tasked with acting out difficult situations. One seventh grader got up in front of his classmates and the foreign visitors and said, "I went to the city last weekend. While there I visited a prostitute. Now I have AIDS." The role-player hung his head in sadness, his classmates loudly applauded his presentation, he beamed, and sat down.

6. (SBU) A MON PTA

We met with the Parent Teacher Association at Wargaru Primary School. None of the parents spoke a word of Burmese, let alone English. We had a spirited, thrice-translated discussion about their aspirations for the community, their families, and the school. It was at this location our Burmese military escort got out of their trucks and deployed in defensive positions in the woods around the school. None of the children spoke any Burmese when they started kindergarten. None of the government-supplied teachers spoke Mon and there was no printed material in Mon in the school. We later visited the neighboring high school and saw a language lab and computer room donated by an expatriate Mon living in the United States. The high school's students, despite starting school without speaking Burmese, scored much higher than average on the national high school exam.

7. (SBU/NF) VOLUNTEER "MICROSCOPIST" WANTS OUT

UNICEF provides supplies and equipment (a traditional doctor's "black bag," etc.) to volunteer midwives and volunteer health assistants in rural clinics who support the salaried nurses and rare doctors. Nurses recently had their salaries doubled to about \$10 per month; the volunteers work for tips. We met one volunteer who was trained to work with a modern microscope to identify malaria in blood samples. She proudly showed off her microscope and rudimentary lab to the UNICEF group and accompanying GOB health officials. After the group moved on, two diplomats remained behind to examine the lab. At that point the young microscopist grabbed both diplomats by the arm and pleaded in English, "I want to go to another country."

18. (SBU/NF) COMMENT: Unlike UNDP, UNICEF Burma is not prohibited from working with elements of the Government of Burma. Indeed, targeting the health, education, and public water sectors almost by definition must involve at least local authorities. UNICEF has been very effective in most of its programs, but had a reputation of being somewhat administratively lax. This may have been due to its partnership with elements of the GOB (for some of which "administratively lax" would be a big improvement) or to past UNICEF management practices. With a new, experienced Country Director on board, along with a new UN Resident Coordinator, we expect UNICEF to continue or expand its ongoing good works, while doing so in a shipshape manner. END COMMENT.
Martinez